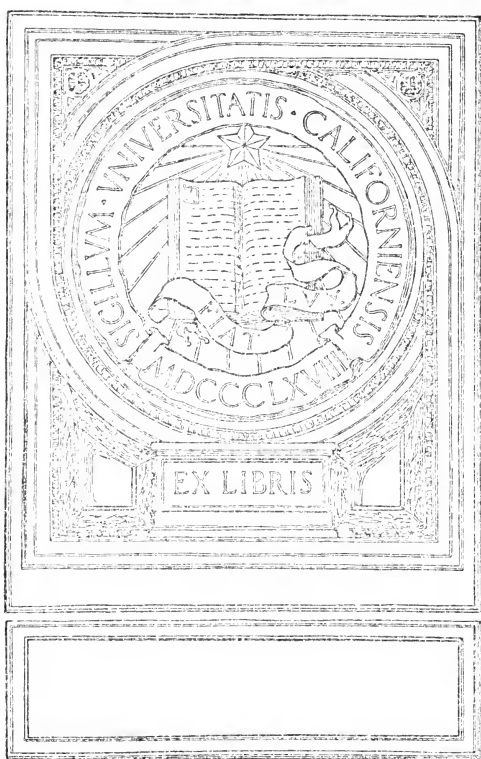


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P O E T R Y :

A SATIRE,

PRONOUNCED BEFORE THE MERCANTILE LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

AT ITS TWENTY SECOND ANNIVERSARY

BY

PARK BENJAMIN.

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TO THE
HONORABLE

John F. Trow, Printer.

TO
ROBERT H. MORRIS,

MAYOR OF THE CITY OF NEW-YORK,

FOR WHOM,

AS A MAN AND AS A MAGISTRATE,

HE ENTERTAINS

THE MOST CORDIAL REGARD AND

SINCERE RESPECT,

THIS POEM IS INSCRIBED,

BY ITS AUTHOR.



P R E F A C E .

THIS poem—if poem it can be called—is published at the request of the Board of Direction of the Mercantile Library Association. It was written at a month's notice, and in the midst of engagements, which distracted the attention of the author, and denied him that leisure, which is so essential to this species of composition. He regrets that he was, consequently, unable to render it more wor-

thy of the occasion, and of the respectable audience, before whom it was pronounced.

Had more time been allowed, ampler justice could have been rendered to a subject, prolific in themes for satire; such, for example, as the political song-making of the day, and the solemn absurdities of the modern Epic. But it was required of the speaker that he should consume no greater number of minutes, than Robin Goodfellow took to

“Put a girdle round about the earth.”

Accordingly it became a duty to choose, rather than to collect topics; to condense, and not to amplify. To those, who are accustomed to the restraints of rhyme, it need not be told how difficult it is to say much in a few words.

The delivery of this poem was preceded by a discourse from a gentleman, who is justly distinguished for his persuasive and kindling eloquence. Mr. EAMES gave an oration, abounding with lofty ideas and splendid imagery ; his language was ornate and beautiful, and his finely-modulated periods had the dignity, if not the form of heroic verse. Good cause was there for apprehension that the audience, after so rich an intellectual treat, could not be interested or even entertained by any thing that was to follow. The author was, therefore, no less surprised than gratified at the indulgence and favor, with which his hasty performance was received.

These remarks are not presented to excuse error, or to avert criticism ; to the latter the author has, perhaps, rendered himself peculiarly obnoxious, and he is quite willing to "bide the pelting of the storm," however "piti-

less" it may be. Here in verse and elsewhere in prose, he has uttered but the Truth, which is "mighty and will prevail," in the face of all the armies of Field-Marshal Humbug and General Puff.

P O E T R Y :

A S A T I R E .

I .

IN DAYS of old, when Money was not king,
Heroes and statesmen bade the minstrel sing :
Lords listened, knights applauded, ladies smiled,
And all were gentle to the Muses' child.
No door refused to open when he came,
No voice but kindly spoke his honored name ;
For him warm welcomes waited, festal cheer,
The glad wine danced and foamed the jovial beer.

On him broad hands a lib'ral guerdon shed,
Fair hands twined laurels for his living head,
And dazzling crowds, assembled round his lyre,
Fed with bright fuel the poetic fire.

Our age degen'rate asks no wand'ring bard ;
The banks have broken and the times are hard ;
Few notes are current, and the least of all,
Notes that are issued when the critics call.
What need of harpers, when in every street
Flutes, fiddles, organs, bagpipes, loud but sweet ?
What need of list'ners, when a motley throng
Of urchins, ragged as the day is long,
Peripatetic, follow in the train
Of him or her who wakes the deathless strain ?

What need of guerdon, when each passing flat
Drops some loose pennies in the handed hat ?
Oh, genius, genius, why wilt thou complain,
And, like a spider, spin away thy brain ;
Why wilt thou waste thy life's green hours in toil,
And burn whole gallons of superfluous oil,
When twenty dollars, borrowed from a friend,
Will buy an organ and thy sorrows end !

II.

This my exordium, friends of learning, take
In very kindness for your poet's sake.
Invoked by you, one little month ago,
He, like young widows, could not answer " No ;"

But dared to try, with unreflecting haste,
A wild excursion to the realms of taste.
Brief space for thought ! to polish line on line,
As boots by rubbing more intensely shine ;
Attempt presumptuous, rash and foolish deed,
To drive old Pegasus at breakneck speed !
Yet pause ere you condemn : if fault there be,
Perchance it lies with you no less than me.
How in these times, these dull, prosaic times,
Came you to dream of giving people rhymes ?
Was't not enough that Eloquence should pour
In lavish splendour his well-hoarded store ?
That Wit and Argument and Taste and Sense
Should their rich gifts with equal hand dispense ?
You should have sought a Virgil through the land,
Or placed the pen in Sprague's or Bryant's hand ;

For mine, though vent'rous, hardly dares essay
To light my lamp amid the blaze of day.
Great men have been among you ; you have heard
From lips of Science many a golden word :
By minds, in study gloriously arrayed,
Yours have been larger, brighter, holier made ;
How poor my task compared with such as theirs,
Like mortal music to celestial airs !

III.

My theme is poetry. Could I unfold
Spontaneous fancies like those bards of old,
Who lived and flourished in the kindling air
Of Inspiration, I might hope to share

At least a portion of the ready praise,
That erst was yielded to *impromptu* lays:
But fact not fable it is mine to sing,
And Truth's strong air impedes the rapid wing.
Ah! that short day has passed to come no more,
When crowds flocked round the merry Troubadour.
We modern minstrels, slaves to pen and ink,
Before we warble are constrained to think.
He, who would speak and fitting audience find,
Must pour his treasures from a cultured mind,
And to the critic's cautious eye display
Well-pondered objects, set in fair array.

Verse is an art, by diligence acquired,
To be long wooed and fervently desired,

Ere, like a maiden, passionate and pure,
Her smiles are granted and her faith secure.
She is no flirt, no flippant, gay coquette,
Who now will flatter and anon will fret;
This moment fond and beautiful appears,
With cheeks all blushes and with eyes all tears;
The next a cold, pert, scornful, froward minx,
Prone to annoy, and puzzling as the Sphinx;
Her favors once bestowed are always given,
Certain as light, unchangeable as Heaven.
Oh, in what hours of weariness and strife,
That have o'erclouded many a noble life,
Hast thou, oh soother of the soul, applied
Thy gentle balm to heal the wounds of pride!
How has thy love, through years of suff'ring bless'd
The pilgrim gazing toward the realms of rest.

The rightful poet, though not doomed to feel
" Luke's iron crown or Damien's bed of steel,"
Knows pangs as keen as tyrants could impose,
When they for whom he labors are his foes ;
When men, made better if they would but hear,
Wring with a frown and torture with a sneer,
And women, tender to the faults of fools,
Adjudge his actions by the strictest rules.
With feelings warm as those bright jets that flow
From frozen Iceland's mountain-wastes of snow,
Though cold in manners and in look austere,
His heart's flood gushes to a smile or tear,
And one kind word from lips he loves can win
His thoughts from sorrow and his deeds from sin.
Join not, my friends, the dull insensate throng
Who rudely trample on the flowers of song ;

But tend and nurture with unfailing care,
 The plants of genius in our native air.
 Point, if you will, against the puny tribe
 Of puling rhymesters cutting jest and gibe;
 Laugh at the fops and damsels in their teens
 Who softly soap the Monthly Magazines;
 From Satire's quiver keenest arrows shoot
 To strike these buzzards of Parnassus mute;
 But guard with kindness from sarcastic aim
 The tuneful birds, the nightingales of fame.

'Tis not my purpose sagely to recite
 How poets should or how they should not write;
 Or to describe the various wave-like styles,—
 How this regurgitates and that resiles:

How metres short like little billows break,
And how long metres leave a lengthy wake.
I cannot see in poems, when they fail,
A woman's body with a fish's tail—
And, if I could, 'twould be in vain to tell
What other critics have discussed so well,
In prose and verse, in light and weighty tomes,
Both old and new, from Horace down to Holmes.
Yet let me pay a tribute to the tongue,
'That o'er our infant sleep our mothers sung.
Though much decried, there's music in the jar
Of our rough, native language; sweeter far
To ears accustomed, than the liquid glide
Of Gallic river or Italian tide.
Oh, that our tongue were limpid as at first,
When from primeval founts it purely burst !

Give me the Saxon, bubbling on the ear
 Like a swift stream, that sparkles cool and clear ;
 I hate your Norman phrases grand and fine,
 That spoil the vigour while they oil the line.
 Sesquipedalian, and of foreign sound,
 Transplanted logs that cumber English ground.
 Words terse and simple best convey the thought,
 By Genius prompted and by Wisdom taught ;
 And Truth, like perfect loveliness, can boast
 To be, when unadorned, adorned the most.

IV .

The common objects in our paths supply
 Shapes that are charming to the poet's eye.

Pictures, as soft as ever Guido drew,
He finds reflected in a drop of dew,
And colours, mingled with a Titian's skill,
On a flower's leaf he traces at his will.
The golden insect, from a worm that springs,
And upward soars on frail yet brilliant wings;
Type of the soul appears, released from earth,
To sport and revel in a heavenly birth.
Such happy fancies can the poet find;
They are the light and solace of his mind;
They yield him inward peace, when outward life
Is one long scene of turbulence and strife.
When friends grow cold and fortune's favors fail,
Imagination spreads her airy sail;
Her barque floats freely over cloud and mist
To purer climes, by milder sunbeams kiss'd.

Perch'd in a garret, nearer to the skies
Than less aspiring mortals choose to rise,
He longs for wings to cleave the blue profound
Like Shelley's lark, a spurner of the ground.
He spends his hours, with little else to spend,
As if each six months brought its dividend ;
Honest and poor, the little that he gains
Supplies him needful books and life sustains ;
And free from debt, in independent state,
He feels no envy of the rich and great.
His mind, exalted by its lofty aim
With grief may be familiar, not with shame ;
For, shunning vice, he runs his mild career,
And looks to Heaven for bliss denied him here.

Contrast this portrait, not in fond conceit
Sketch'd from a model long since obsolete,
With one I might, but will not, dare not draw,
Because I rev'rence wealth and fear the law.
No boy e'er gazed with more entire respect
On martial hero in his trappings deck'd,
Than I on men, by mighty Mammon made
The sons of traffick and the slaves of trade.
What can be nobler than our lives to give
To gain the very means whereby we live;
To rise at morning and forget to pray,
Intent upon the business of the day ;
The day concluded, to retire to rest
And dream what stocks, what markets are the best !
What can be worthier of immortal man
Than these grand maxims : get whate'er you can,

Keep all you get, be careful how you spend,
Know well your customers, and never lend !
So shall the world upon its axle roll,
And every turn bring comfort to your soul :
So shall your bank-account be figured wide,
And every figure on the proper side :
So shall your wife in coach and Cashmere shawl
Drive down Broadway, the wonderment of all :
So shall your son, returned from foreign tour,
Hirsutely horrid, fright the gaping boor :
So shall your daughter come from boarding-school,
In all, but French and flattery, a fool :
So shall you smile with ill-concealed disdain
On old, poor friends, whose presence causes pain :
So shall you, every Sunday, in your pew,
Devoutly curse Turk, Infidel and Jew :

So shall you live, without a grief or care,
And die and go—I need not mention where.

“Is trade so low? Are all pursuits so base
In which to gather money, toil our race?
Must we, of course, be deemed averse to high
And manly learning, if we sell and buy?
Can we not prize the godlike and the true
Which Art and Science open to our view?
Let Hist’ry answer from her teeming page;
Answer the records, kept from age to age
Of mightier ones than heroes, princely, great,—
Not props alone, but rulers of the state;
Not friends alone to genius, but possess’d
Of intellectual powers, the noblest, best.

Answer yourselves! Instruction's youthful friends—
On whom the city's future weal depends.
Why have you fixed amid the homes of trade
A learned retreat, an Academic shade?
Why, at your kind command, year after year,
Do sages speak, and numbers throng to hear?
From you, thus raised above the sordid thought
That man's chief good in money must be sought,
Even poets, reckless as they are of fame,
A gen'rous feeling for their art may claim.
And yet some reasons have we to deplore
That the bright reign of Poetry is o'er;
That in her fav'rite haunts no more she roves,
But dwells secluded in deep, sombre groves,
In caves forlorn, rude glens and deserts wild,
By foaming floods and rocks in ruin piled.

Behold the Drama ! once the Muses' friend :

When will her night of degradation end ?

When will the spirit of true Art return

And from her altars dogs and dancers spurn ?

When will a Garrick, matchless and alone,

Crowned by Thalia, mount her ancient throne ?

When will another mind-controlling Kean

Lend real grandeur to the mimic scene ?

Now, on that stage, for which Ben Jonson wrote,

Struts paltry Pantomime in motley coat.

Where stately Congreve and sententious Ford

And moving Massinger were once adored,

Frail feeble wits prodigious puffs receive,

The groundlings giggle, the judicious grieve.

Where Kemble, Young, "the Siddons" and O'Neill

Taught human nature human woes to feel,

Alluring Ellsler wins the town's applause,
Celeste enraptures, and Van Amburgh draws !
Of yore th' intent and business of the stage
Was to expose the follies of the age,
Or from grave knowledge lessons to translate
And teach the dictates and decrees of Fate.
For this the grand, old masters aptly chose
The robes of verse and not the garb of prose.
What glorious thoughts in glorious lines were cast !
In splendid frames, what pictures of the past !
What lofty sentiments and precepts pure
In verse, like marble sculptured to endure !
Vast is the debt from English letters due
To the old drama—little to the new.
Though I would not one leaf of laurel tear
From the green wreath that circles Talfourd's hair,

Or be esteemed so deaf to well-won fame
As not to echo Artevelde Taylor's name ;
Though Milman, Mitford, and—if last not least,
Of those who spread the genial, Thespian feast—
Exuberant Knowles, the cordial praise acquire
Of all the lovers of the modern lyre ;
Their gifts to poetry may not compare
With those of bards, whom Time will ever spare,
As he has spared for ages, undeformed,
Though bigots storm as they have ever stormed.
No floods have worn thy mighty adamant
Oh first of poets ! Criticism, cant,
New readings, commentaries, dash their rain
Against thy firm foundations, all in vain.
His grave is humble: but what pilgrims throng,
Who deeply love the Swan of Avon's song,

To bend, with feelings more devout and true
Than faithful Moslems, Mecca full in view,
Before that shrine, long hallowed by the birth
Of SHAKSPEARE, monarch of the bards of earth !

Not mine the skill, nor yet the duty mine
To sing the cause of Poetry's decline ;
Enough if I from rude assault defend,
And prove myself her advocate and friend.
Though for a while withdrawn from mortal ken,
She shall arise and sweetly shine again,
Like some fair star, by clouds concealed from sight,
That glows, rekindled, with superior light.

'Tis a sad truth, and one I fain would hide,

That even the fair our gentle craft deride.
Though some there be, who dare to write and print,
Whose lily fingers wear an inky tint,
Instead of scars that numerous needles make ;
Some who will scribble when they ought to bake ;
Yet the majority—oh potent word !—
Deem poets foolish and their lines absurd.
But this is better than the rhyming rage—
That only Wit and Satire could assuage—
By which, not long ago, the female breast
By turns was ravished and by turns distressed.

“ Laura Matilda ”—fascinating name !

Legions of lovely lyrists longed to claim.

Each mincing miss, absolved from book and slate,
Filled with romance her poorly-furnished pate ;
Sought for adventures, sighed for constant swains,
Made silly rhymes and christened them "refreins ;"
Strolled forth by moonlight, wretched and alone,
And to the gales rehearsed her piteous moan :
(The gales, unmoved, ceased not their rueful roar,
But, as she moaned, blew louder than before ;)
Nought could subdue her sentimental woe,
Nought cause her tears less dolefully to flow—
Till, with chameleon diet tired at last,
Her heart she mended while she broke her fast ;
And found in puddings, not to mention beef,
A pleasing solace and a mild relief.
Nor girls alone, but women, grown in years,
Resigned their souls to love's delicious fears ;

Deplored in song the fickleness of men,
And wrote and wept, and wept and wrote again.
What streams of nonsense rushed impetuous down !
What floods of twattle deluged all the town !
How many beaux to mis'ry were consigned,
Because they thought of marriage more than mind !
How many husbands were condemned to scold
O'er locks dishevelled, and o'er dinners cold !
Mankind despaired : for daughters, sisters, wives,
Dawdled like drones in their domestic hives.
Just then, when Sapphos sung on every steep,—
Though, haply, none plunged headlong in the deep—
When Della Crusca, fond and fragile thing,
Soft, sweet and stupid, reigned supernal king ;
When *hearts* to *darts*, and *love* to *dove* were strung,
And *trees* and *breeze* resounded from the tongue ;

When Juno, Venus, Cupid, Vulcan, Mars,
And all the gods, from whom were named the stars,
And all the goddesses who sate, where high
Olympus towers above the azure sky,
Were by sheer force lugged into feeble verse
To gild a blessing or to smooth a curse.
Then, then, like sunshine on a vale of mist,
With power that dullness never could resist,
A critic rose; his bright pen darting made
Strokes swift and keen as Arthur's famous blade.
Their ranks o'erthrown, the Della Cruscan train
Bedewed with ink the literary plain;
Sometimes they rallied, but that mighty pen
Flashed in the air, and scattered them again.
With feathers drooping and with paper spoiled,
The ladies saw how needlessly they toiled;

Then came that "sober, second thought," which rules
More female breasts than dogmas taught in schools.
With graceful ease they yielded up the lyre,
And on Home's altar lit the perished fire;
Happy once more, nor emulous of fame,
They joined with men in blessing Gifford's name.

Since thus supinely Della Crusca fell,
Few lovesick nymphs have struck the chorded shell;
But youths of sterner sex and weaker stuff
Dose the dear public with bad lines enough.
Whatever happens, be it gay or sad,
Ten thousand poetasters rave, like mad.
If steam-boat boilers into shivers blow,
If some lone damsel stub her precious toe;

If great men die, as small ones always do,
If " sudden frogs" leap wildly into view ;
If ships at sea by angry storms be tost,
Or a pet lap-dog run away and lost ;
If sinks the " sun with battle-stained eye ;"
Or little babes like little cherubs cry ;
If states repudiate and swindlers flee,
Or thou, oh, " woodman," wilt not " spare that tree ;"
If aught transpire that often has before,
And will occur as many times and more—
As sure as fate, they each are jotted down,
And some moon's minion wins a month's renown.
Oh, it offends me to the soul to hear
Such poor flies buzzing in the public ear ;
And yet, like uncle Toby, I would say,
Deluded insects, buzz your hours away !

To blow your tiny trumpets ye are free,

“The world is wide enough for you and me.”

Ye solemn dunces ! publish if you must,

Till Pope and Milton are consigned to dust ;

Then may your stanzas be admired by men,

Though much I question if 'twill be till then.

Write reams of nonsense-verses without end,

That even yourselves can hardly comprehend.

Address “short sonnets” to your mistress fair,

And vow that angels can't with her compare ;

Tell her she conquers kingdoms with a glance,

And that her charms like brilliant hosts advance,

And that she is—all ladies far above—

“The grand Napoleon of the world of love.”

Break Priscian's head, strike Lindley Murray dumb ;

Heaven's thunder liken to a dreadful drum ;

Invoke the stars, bright wheeling round our globe,
As twinkling jewels on a purple robe ;
And call fair Cynthia, when she sails in sight,
“ Thou breast-pin on the bosom of the night ;”—
It matters not : true passion still will glow
In manly hearts, and genuine feeling flow.
It matters not : the thunder still will roll,
The stars still burn, undimmed, from pole to pole,
The moon still shine, and day succeed to day,
Though magpies chatter and though asses bray.

When first the infant sees a candle blaze,
His feeble eyes are dazzled by the rays ;
But, grown familiar with the splendid sight,
His chubby fingers strive to grasp the light ;

The prudent nurse restrains the rash desire,
Nor burns the child to make it dread the fire.
So honest critics should rebuke the boys
Who want to trifle with poetic toys :
Let them have other weapons used by men,
But not that dang'rous implement, the pen.
With swords and guns they may some mischief do,
And windows break which glaziers can renew ;
But sense once outraged deeply we deplore,
And lost good-temper nothing can restore.

V .

Thus by examples, not sublimely sung,
Like any thing but "*pearls*, at random strung,"

Have I essayed, perhaps in vain, to show
Why Verse in modern days has fall'n so low ;
Why that high Art, from age to age renowned,
By Valour courted and by Beauty crowned,
Which won more honours from the fair and bold
Than now are lavished on victorious gold ;—
Scorned by the many, by the few caressed,
No longer triumphs in the human breast.
No longer triumphs ! What ! has Faith decayed ?
Can Friendship falter and Affection fade ?
Can Pity fail, and Passion quench his fire,
And Hope and Fear, and Joy and Grief expire ?
Can tearful Sympathy and vocal Mirth,
And all that saddens, all that gladdens Earth,
Depart like shadows in the morning-hour,
Melt like the frost and perish like the flower ?

They cannot die ! they are themselves the soul,
Which, born in Heaven, exults o'er Time's control.
These are the founts of Heliconian streams,
And these the shapes that haunt the poet's dreams;
While they exist, the noble art they gave
Laughs at Oblivion and defies the grave.

END.



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